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ABSTRACT

Accounts differ as to the state of adult literacy education in China. One scholar says that programs are contracting severely, whereas Chinese officials contend that programs are operating with more students and more efficiency. A true picture of literacy education in China depends on research and statistics that are being gathered. The overall tone of this emerging picture is optimistic. China today is conducting the world's largest and most promising experiment in using adult education for social change. However, some problems surface; for example, national aspirations for literacy promotion are now focusing only on the age group 15-40 and thereby making the illiteracy problem shrink to one-third its size. Lessons that can be learned from the Chinese experience include the following: (1) political commitment to social reform and adult education is necessary; (2) it is possible to bring development to rural areas concurrently with urban areas; (3) policy should be disseminated among the people by catchy slogans and phrases; (4) adult education should be institutionalized; (5) culture is likely to be neglected in societies in which economic deprivations are most acutely felt; and (6) special efforts are needed to bring literacy education to women and minorities. (KC)

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ADULT LITERACY AND ADULT EDUCATION IN THE SOCIALIST MODERNIZATION OF CHINA: POLICY, PERFORMANCE, LESSONS

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ADULT LITERACY AND ADULT EDUCATION IN THE SOCIALIST MODERNIZATION OF CHINA: POLICY, PERFORMANCE, LESSONS

What is the role assigned to adult literacy and adult education in the socialist modernization of China within the nation's overall development policy? What is the effectiveness of the adult education (and adult literacy) system in terms of its performance in implementing stated policy? What lessons literacy workers and adult educators elsewhere in the world can learn from the Chinese experience?

In trying to answer these questions, I am happy to be able to combine historical analysis with an autobiographical detail. The autobiographical detail is that I was recently in the People's Republic of China on a Unesco mission and was in the country for about 24 days from July 13 to August 6, 1990. I am not going to claim that there was, in my body and soul, a sudden rush of "instant expertise" on China during my rather short visit to the country (1). I do like to affirm, however, that the visit was a highly enlightening and deeply moving experience as the people of mainland China came to have a real existence; the multifarious aspects of the Chinese economic, social, political and cultural reality became concrete; and the daily struggles and common joys of men and women, of boys and girls in villages, in free markets, shops, bus stations and in town squares could be directly experienced.

With this direct personal experience, I will combine my modest "education at a distance" about China over the last many years, and my own earlier work on adult literacy in China (Bhola, 1984; 1989). At the same time, I will, of course, draw heavily on the work done by others in the areas of adult literacy and adult education in China. I do indeed begin with two pictures of adult education in China painted by others (China, 1990a; Lofstedt, 1990).

PICTURE ONE

The first picture is painted by Lofstedt (1990). Lofstedt is a scholar with deep sympathies for the Third World, and particularly for China, where he spent some years as a teacher in the mid-1960s, and whereto he has returned many times since in pursuit of his interests in Chinese education. This report has been published by a specialized institute of Unesco (1990). Lofstedt writes in a careful style, weighing every word, and basing his remarks almost exclusively, if not completely, on statistical data.

In his own words:

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In contrast to higher (general) education, adult education has suffered severe setbacks at least in quantitative terms after the "cultural revolution". Enrolment in literacy classes and in primary education for adults has dropped continuously, and in some cases dramatically, since the 1970s (Figures 6:1, 6:2, and 6:3). [Not reproduced in this paper.] In the mid-1980s only a little more than three million adults were enrolled in primary education as compared to more than 127 million ten years earlier. By 1987, the figure had dropped even further to around 1.7 million. Enrolment in secondary technical schools and tertiary institutions for adults have also come down in the 1980s ... [but] .... are beginning to show a more steady and upward trend again.... There are also signs that the falling adult enrolment in formal educational institutions has to some extent been compensated for by more stress on on-the-job training and short-term courses organized by the work units. It can not be denied, however, as pointed out earlier, that the new economic strategy which stresses material incentives and increased scope for individuals to engage in income generating activities, has had adverse effects on the commitment to education of both adults and children.

The economic reforms have given more decision-making power to the managers of enterprises and, within certain limits, these now have the authority to hire, promote and dismiss personnel. In their attempts to increase profits some managers prefer to recruit more skilled personnel from elsewhere rather than invest money in the upgrading of existing personnel. Some of them also realise that if they do invest in training they may run the risk of loosing workers to other enterprises.

The falling enrolment in primary education and literacy classes to only a few percent of the peak enrolment in the 1970s is also serious since nearly 30 percent of total population and more than 40 percent of the rural women are illiterate. There are also signs that illiteracy, or at least semi-literacy, is in fact increasing because of dimishing participation of children in regular primary schools and increasing dropout, especially in more remote rural areas and in some rapidly developing areas where there is a shortage of labour.

The agricultural sector is lagging especially far behind in the provision of adult university education. Whereas workers and staff constitute about 25 percent of the work force they have around 340,000 adult students enrolled in workers universities compared to an enrolment of about 1,100 in peasants universities in spite of the fact that the latter have nearly 75 percent of the work force."

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One can not fail to note that the above is a picture of contractions of programs and contradictions in effects. One could, of course, take the various assertions in the text above, one by one, to accept some, question and qualify others, and to contextualize almost all of them, and thereby make the picture look much less severe than it looks now. But let us, first, look at another picture, that presents quite a different reality of adult literacy and adult education in China.

PICTURE TWO

The second picture of the policy and performance of adult education and adult literacy in China, like Picture One above, is also a freshly painted picture. This Picture Two was painted by the Chinese policy makers themselves and finalized during July-August 1990 for presentation at the 42nd Session of the International Conference on Education, organized by Unesco International Bureau of Education, Geneva, during September 3-8, 1990.

Once again, this is a responsible formulation by officials speaking in behalf of their Government at an international forum. It is based on the latest data available to these officials. While Picture One was based essentially on quantitative data, Picture Two uses quantitative data as well as qualitative statements on the ideological-political and socio-economic contexts of adult education and adult literacy, and makes claims about changes that adult education and adult literay may have wrought in the lives of the Chinse people.

The five to six pages of materials that follow summarize the section on adult literacy and adult education included in the Chinese government report referred to above (China, 1990a). The original material has been reduced to a little more than one-fourth of its size. As far as possible the language of the original report has been retained. Minor linguistic changes have been made here and there to assist readability.

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<u>The Vital Role Played by Adult Education</u>

Adult education ... assumes the vital tasks of improving the qualities of the in-service personnel and promoting directly the social and economic development. In the 1980's, impressive progress has been made in the field of adult education, and a systematic structure has come into being, in which all levels of education are included, primary, secondary and higher learning. Certified courses run parallel with non-certified courses. The forms of running school and of teaching adults are diversified. This structure is well-coordinated with general education.

Many Forms, Many Settings

Adult education in China today covers higher learning, secondary and primary education as well as literacy teaching. Forms of learning include: "full-time classroom teaching, self-learning with audio-visual materials, full-time, part-time or spare-time learning. The certified education for adults includes: one-year university courses, short-term special college courses, specialized secondary schools and general secondary schools. The non-certified education for adults includes: literacy programme, the training of applied technologies in the rural areas ... as well as continuing education.

Despite the dramatic growth of adult education, some problems arose in the "1980-85" period. The "Decisions of the State Education Commission concerning the Reform and Development of Adult Education" approved by the State Council in June 1987, have clarified priorities and major tasks of adult education during the 1990s. Post-training, that is, in-service training has been identified as the priority item on adult education agenda.

Achievements During 1988-89

During the period, 1988-89, the following achievements were recorded:

Adult Higher Education

Number of independent institutes of higher learning for adults: (a decrease of 66 from 1987)	1,333
Regular institutions of higher learning which run correspondence courses or night schools for adults: (a little increase over 1987)	634
Total enrollment in adult higher education: (a decrease of 116,800 from 1987)	1,741,100

Adult Secondary Education

Total number of secondary schools for adults: (an increase of 4,771 over 1987)		56,339
Specialized secondary schools: (an increase of 228 over 1987)	4,970	
Secondary schools: (a decrease of 3,135 from 1987)	9,837	

Secondary technical training schools: 41,982
(an increase of 7,678 over 1987;
74.5% of total secondary schools)
(There is a slight discrepancy here
in figures.)

Total enrollment of adults
in secondary schools: 15,411,100
(an increase of 4,490,700 over 1987)

Enrollment in secondary technical
training schools only: 12,635,300
(an increase of 5,272,700 over 1987;
82% of the total enrollment for
secondary schools)

Adult Primary Education

Number of primary schools for adults: 214,300
(an increase of 39,500 over 1987)

Enrollment in adult primary schools: 19,461,100
(an increase of 5,943,200 over 1987)

Participants in literacy classes 3,955,500
(an increase of 1,477,100 over 1987)

Successful completers of literacy
programs 2,000,000
(an increase of 480,000 over 1987;
In 1989 a 38.8% increase in the number
of neo-literates over 1988).

Self-Learning Examination Systems

Higher Education

Number of subjects offered: 97
(an increase of 27 subjects over 1987)

Recorded participants (earning at least one
qualification certificate for a single subject): 3,000,000

Those earning diplomas from regular universities
or special colleges: 400,000

Specialized Secondary Schools

Number of subjects offered: 50

Recorded participants: 430,300

Those earning diplomas: 64,600

Training in Applied Technologies in Rural Areas

Peasants participating in training of applied technologies of various kinds since 1986:		150,000,000

In-Service Training

Workers who have had 50 class hours of in-service training:		29,540,000
Workers receiving in-service training as percentage of the total work force:		
1986:	16.4%	
1987:	17.9%	
1988:	29.9%	
Directors, economists, engineers receiving in-service training:		20,000
Percentage of total target group:	40%	
Heads of workshops or working groups in enterprises receiving in-service training:		1,980,000
Percent of the total target group:	42%	

Television Universities

Number of television universities: (1 at the central level; 39 at the provincial level)	40
Teaching classes:	30,000
Enrollment:	417,400

Size of the Non-Governmental Effort

The above statistics do not reflect adult education services offered by non-government organizations. The size and scope of the non-governmental effort can be surmized from the fact that as many as 3 million adults were enrolled in some 3,000 schools by only twelve of the big cities, among them, Beijing, Tianjing and Shanghai.

Objectives and Strategies in the Eradication of Illiteracy

During the years 1949-89, a total of 165,000,000 people became literate, an average of 4 million a year. The illiteracy

rate has dropped from over 80% to about 20%. In over half of the counties (townships), universal primary education has been achieved and illiteracy among the young people basically eradicated. According to the statistics, in the age group 15-40, those with an education level of junior and senior secondary schools account for more than 30%; neo-literates and those with a level of primary education 50%; while the illiteracy and semi-illiteracy dropped to below 20%. It can be said that China is now no longer a land of illiterates. The absolute figure of illiterates, however, remains intolerably high. Therefore, it is of absolute necessity to continue efforts in literacy and post-literacy education.

The year 1988 saw the issuance of "Regulations on Literacy Programme" by the State Council, requiring that the eradication of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy among the age group 15-40 should be basically achieved by the end of year 2000 or a bit longer. It means that by the end of this century, at least half of the present 72 million young and middle-aged illiterates should become literate. The word "basically" means that: In the age group of 15-40, literacy rate should be over 85% in the rural areas and over 90% in enteprises, institutions and townships, for those regions or units where this target has already been reached, continued efforts should be made to lower the illiteracy rate in that age group to 5%.

Planned Regional Differentiations

Three regional realities have been accepted to accommodate flexible targets and strategies:

1. The first is the advanced and parts of the relatively developed regions including municipalities and counties and districts which have achieved universal primary education and basically wiped out illiteracy. It is required of these to continue to eradicate the remaining illiteracy and achieve a 95% literacy rate among the population aged between 15 and 40. Efforts must also be made to improve the literacy level in the population over the age of 40.

2. The second is the relatively developed regions including municipalities and counties (districts) which have yet to achieve basic literacy. These regions are required to achieve basic literacy, on the basis of a universal primary education, among the young and middle-aged population between 1990 and 1995, thereby achieving a literacy rate of over 85% in the age group of 15 to 40. Further efforts need to be made on this basis so as to eventually achieve a 95% literacy rate.

3. The third is the less developed regions, which are required to proceed from the local conditions and gradually wipe out illiteracy among the young and middle-aged population on the basis of universal primary education. A 85% literacy rate in the age group of 15 to 40 is expected to be achieved between

1995 and 2000. The extremely poor and difficult regions are required to create necessary conditions now and gradually carry out literacy education. Priority will be given to youth and children, so as to enable every peasant family to have at least one member with literacy skills. This is to be followed by literacy programs targeted at the young and middle-aged population. Efforts will be made to basically wipe out illiteracy by the early part of the next century.

Literacy with Functionality

As a new development in literacy education in China, literacy has been integrated with teaching of skills to serve the purposes of promoting a commodity economy in rural areas.

Literacy teaching has been combined with teaching of economic skills to enable people to become "rich." At the same time, differentiation of literacy standards is tolerated: For peasants, the criteria for individual literacy is the recognition of 1,500 Chinese characters; but for employees in urban enterprises and for urban residents 2,000 characters. In addition, they must demonstrate ability to read simple newspaper articles, keep basic accounts, and write simple pieces for practical purposes.

The role assigned to primary education in the eradication of illiteracy should be noted. In this regard it should be noted also that in 1986, The Law on Compulsory Education of People's Republic of China was enaced by the National People's Congress.

Administrative Responsibility System for Literacy

An administrative responsibility system has been introduced under which literacy achievement is part of the evaluation of administrators and leaders at various levels. A contract system among stakeholders has been introducted to introduce and sustain inventives and rewards, thereby to overcome the deficiencies of equalitarianism in the past. Funding for adult literacy work comes from the following sources: funds raised by village and township government, urban community, and other organizations concerned; expenditures for staff training and education in enterprises and state organizations; and an earmarked sum of the rural educational levy. Local governments at all levels are required to provide necessary subsidies. In addition, social forces and individuals are also encouraged to contribute financially on a voluntary basis.

The slogan for literacy eradication in China is: Prevention, Eradication, and Upgrading. Post-literacy work is, understandably, an impoprtant part of the plan for the eradication of illiteracy. Peasants' Schools for Culture and Technology fit in here admirably. These constitute, of course, only one mode of post-literacy education. At present, China has over 3,600 peasant schools run by county authorities, 33,200

peasant cultural and technical schools run by town and township departments, in addition to over 180,000 village peasant spare-time schools.

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While Picture One may have been a bit pessimistic, Picture Two can be seen as too optimistic. While the first may have been too cautious and somewhat severe, the second may have been too harmonious and rather self-congratulatory. Where can one find a true picture of the Chinese reality?

TOWARD A NEW CONSTRUCTION OF ADULT LITERACY AND ADUTL EDUCATION IN CHINA

That, one and only, true picture of adult literacy and adult education in China, with the right numbers and the right meanings, is, of course, impossible to construct. One can, however, work towards a description that presents the best approximation to the reality in the sense that such a description is relatively more compelling, more coherent, and more credible to more people with diverse value positions. More importantly, one should be able to gather from such a description, useful theoretical and practical insights and learn some useful lessons without getting lost in details of numbers, definitions, criteria and evidence. Such a picture, we hope, is in the making in the book on adult education in China which is currently in the process of being written. We can not today present our picture within the scope of this presentation, but will talk of the two bold strokes of paint that will be used in this future picture. One is a stroke made with the "paint of theory" and the other is a stroke made with the "paint of practice."

The Stroke of Theory

My theoretical filters tell me that social change is a value enterprise and hence an ideological project. It follows that evaluative judgements on adult literacy and adult education programs in China should be rendered within the framework of the ideology and the political culture of the Chinese people. This is not the impossible invitation to separate "facts" from "values", or the invitation to surrender one's own political values to adopt the Chinese socialist ideology. What we suggest is that disagreements in ideology must be faced but then should not confound judgements on the calculus of policy and performance within their particular setting.

Social change is complex involving invention and restructuring of new patterns and institutions -- social, economic and political. Social change (and adult literacy promotion as both an instrument and an instance of social change) is, therefore, low. It is dialectical, that is, it sometimes produc consequences opposite from those being

expected. Thus, social change is an experiment involving approximations rather than certainties. Social change can not be spread instantly and evenly over the whole system -- certainly not all over a country of continental size such as China. Because of the initial set of historical conditions, one can not always avoid strategies that initially may be starting from the "center" and moving out to the "periphery." Balancing the need for equality and provision of incentives is not an easy task. In the process, disparities may be accentuated in the short run. More is not necessarily better. Ever-increasing numbers may mean that the circle of mediocrity is being expanded. Decreasing numbers, on the other hand, may be good news because quality of instructional experiences may be improving or missions and objectives of programs may be under review and reformulation. Overall progress should be judged both in terms of inter and intra comparisons. Unless there is evidence, leaderships need not be attributed malficence or conspiratorial intents.

The Stroke of Practice

The other bold stroke of paint used in my composite in the making is what I saw in practice in Chinese adult education especially in the area of peasant's schools of culture and technology and the effects such schools already seemed to have had on the lives of people in terms of the material culture. It is a bright and optimistic stroke of paint in the emerging picture (China, 1990b).

The Overall Tone of the Emerging Picture

The overall tone and mood of my emerging picture is sympathetic, optimistic, even enthusiastic. My earlier description of the Chinese literacy campaigns during the 1950s to the 1980s (Bhola, 1984) had been characterized as "laudatory" (Hayford, 1987). My personal accounts of my recent visit to China given to my friends were considered by some of them as "surprises" and by one as evidence that "the Chinese surely had gotten to me." On reconsideration, I yet consider that China today is conducting the world's largest, and most promising experiment in using adult education in social change.

That does not mean that the Chinese system is faultless and their experience without blemishes. Indeed, I see problems in the reduction of national aspirations by the Chinese for literacy promotion in now focussing only on the age group 15-40 and thereby, by statistical fiat, making the illiteracy problem shrink to its one-third of its real size. I am worried about the emphasis on becoming "rich" and the comparative neglect of what the Chinese adult educators call "the spiritual culture." I am worried somewhat about the over-institutionalization of adult literacy and adult education work. Finally, I saw an important and urgent need for the education of the adult educators themselves who showed little interest in the dynamics of change processes, or in the diagnosis of instructional problems.

Lessons and Understandings from the Chinese Experience

On balance there is much that can be learned from the Chinese and it is to the lessons from the Chinese experience to which we now turn.

Knowldege, we now seem to understand quite well, is contextual. Facts can not always be separated from values. Neither policies and plans, nor institutional and professional solutions can be carried without adaptation from one political cuture to another. Indeed, what we can take from one context to another are not ready-made solutions, or generalizations, but general understandings and promising insights.

The above is particularly important to keep in mind as we seek to learn from China. Two points are specially germane. First, China is a socialist society and a one party state. Within such a political culture, it is possible to have clear articulations between Marxist ideology, state policy and planning, and the structure and content of programs of economic reform and education. Second, because of the national registration system, here is very little unauthorized movement of population and change of abode, and local communities, therefore, are relatively stable. At the same time, since most if not all employees in China are state employees who are assigned to their jobs and stations by the state, the cadres responsible for development and education are also relatively stable within their communities.

Even though the above two conditions may not be as pervasive in countries elsewhere in the world, adult educators in other countries, and particularly in the Third World, can acquire some useful understandings and learn some useful lessons from the Chinese experience:

1. The first and the foremost lesson from the Chinese experience, especially for the Third World adult educators, is about the necessity of political commitment, first to social reform in the interest of people, and then to the role of adult literacy and adult education in actualizing overall reform. The Chinese commitment to adult education and adult literacy does, of course, follow from their larger commitment to the socialist ideology. It need not mean, however, that socialism is the only such ideological source of commitment and that non-socialist ideologies can not become sources for similarly deep commitments.

2. There is another important lesson about development processes to be learned from the Chinese experience. The lesson is that it is possible to bring development to rural areas, if not first, then at least concurrently with developments in urban areas. The simultaneous development of the urban center and the rural periphery in the Chinese setting is truly inspiring. The peasantry is not left to suffer in poverty while the urban

populations begin to consume more and more of national wealth. Indeed, the peasantry may be half a step ahead of the urban labor.

3. The Chinese case clearly demonstrates that education is a political process, and then goes on to show that to succeed in education, the politician must serve education. The politician and the educator in China have been yoked to the same plough. The politician has been made responsible for the success of educational initiative, while the professional educator takes charge of the curricular and instructional aspects of education.

4. Connected with the above is another lesson: the need to ensure that economic structures and educational structures must be in congruence with each other if education has to play a role in economic reform. Too often within the capitalist-liberal context, educators and owners of productive resources have opposing interests and in the name of individual freedom pull their weight in different directions. While in the capitalist-liberal context, centralized control over these structures can not be assumed nor imposed, there is still room for removing some obvious distortions and disparities.

5. The Chinese experience demostrates the need not only to have clear-cut policy but also its popular dissemination among the people in the form of slogans and catchy phrases. Being "rich" has become the goal of <u>all</u> the Chinese people today. Everybody knows that anti-illiteracy work must involve three approaches: prevention, eradication, and consolidation. There are many many other examples of how national policy statements have been translated into commonsense slogans that have then become current coins of discussion at all levels of the system.

6. The Chinese experience demonstrates the need for "institutionalization" of adult education initiatives if we have to ensure that adult education work can continue to be done systematically and with some expectation of continuity. While adult educators will have to stay alert to ensure that adult education institutions do not become hardened and unresponsive, but continue to be outward looking and stay engaged in extension roles, institutionalization of the delivery of adult education services must not be rejected out of hand.

7. The Chinese experience tells us also that institutions need not be either dedicated to formal education or to nonformal education, but that they can be designed to serve both purposes. One will, of course, have to guard against the "edifice" complex and not allocate unduly large resources to constructing building.

8. The Chinese case demonstrates the need for not to be dogmatic but to allow for a dialectic between opposites: the dogmatic and the pragmatic, between the local and the global, and between the part and the whole, etc.

9. The Chinese case of socialist modernization repeats a lesson that economists in capitalist-liberal context have long sought to teach -- the need to create incentive structures that release the latent energies of individual farmers. (Schultz, 1981).

10. Related with the above is the lesson that without scientific and technological knowledge modernization is impossible. Traditional knowledge that was good enough for subsistence, by itself, is not enough when the few must produce for the many. It is significant to note that the Chinese have given the leadership of adult education institutions to agronomists and engineers, not to adult educators from the "humanist culture" who quite often may themselves be "scientifically illiterate."

11. There is a negative lesson to be learned from the above. When culture and technology are mixed in the curriculum, culture is likely to be neglected in societies where economic deprivations are the most acutely felt. In the Chinese situation culture has been ralatively neglected, while scientific and technological knowledge is predominant. Special efforts will have to be made to give due attention to the so-called "spiritual culture."

12. Other countries can learn from China's program of linking adult literacy with adult continuing education. Adult literacy is taught first, and adult education follows in sequence. Adult literacy is functional, but it is considered to be no more than a starting point for rural and vocations education that must follow. There has been a remarkable redefinition of aspirations in adult education -- knowledge equivalenace of nine years of basic education is being aspired to.

13. The Third World should learn from the Chinese as to how to make <u>production</u> central to the educational enterprize. Adult educational institutions in China, at their best, are neither merely educational nor merely production sheds. They are both. Production level of some of the peasants' schools of culture and technology are truly impressive. For instance, some of them make annual net profits running into millions of Yuans (One dollar was equivalent to 4.71 Yuan in mid-1990.)

14. The need for training of personnel for effective delivery of programs is a recurrent theme of the Chinese experience. This is particulary challenging in China because when they talk of trained cadres they mean cadres trained in both (i) science and technology <u>and</u> (ii) the process of adult education. If anything, their emphasis is on training in the scientific sector rather than in the cultural sector.

15. There is yet another negative lesson to be learned. Inspite of the best intentions of adult educators and literacy

workers, minorites and women can remain under-served and that bold and brilliant efforts are needed to serve these excluded groups.

16. Finally, David Apter's vision that in all societies, socialist and capitalist, socio-economic development will bring "choices" to the people, and ultimately "democaracy" as well. The Chinese may not create a Western-style democracy, but as economic deprivations are redressed, peoples may be inventing special Chinese-style structures and patterns in which individual and communal choices can be made.

NOTES

1. That was by no means my first encounter with China. Indeed, my interest in China dates back to the 1950s when as a student at the Punjab University in India, I had the opportunity of studying Chinese history and culture as well as the politics of its transformation under the leadership of Mao Zedong. I particularly remember reading with great interest the weekly columns written for the Hindustan Times by one of India's ambassadors to the People's Republic of China, Dr. K.M. Pannikar, a historian of no ordinary merit. Since the mid-1970s, as an academic at Indiana University, in Indiana, USA, I have been studying the role of education, particularly adult literacy and adult education, in the socio-economic development of China.

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